

The False Masculinity

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Lynn Coady's novel *Saints of Big Harbour* delves into several different issues and themes regarding societal expectations and the effects that these expectations have on people. One of these themes is that of how masculinity is portrayed in a small Atlantic Canadian town. In this setting, a very inflexible standard for how masculinity should be expressed is set, and the men are expected to comply or risk the consequences. Even though adhering to the norm of masculinity allows characters to receive respect within their community, there are many undesirable consequences to practicing the specific form of masculinity described by Coady. Through her development of male characters, Coady explores how the ideal of masculinity is a fabricated, inaccurate, and damaging concept that is necessary to practice in order to receive respect.

The standard for masculinity is inflexible and damaging to not only the men themselves, but also the people around them. In this novel, being masculine is described as having all the traits that would make one confident and physically, mentally, and emotionally strong. Alison sums it up best when he describes Isadore as "stronger[,] . . . healthy, . . . good-looking, . . . charismatic[,] . . . articulate, . . . uncannily manipulative[,] . . . a natural leader[,] . . . perceptive[,] . . . [and] intelligent. In short, . . . the ultimate specimen of manhood" (191). This description from Alison reveals what traits are considered masculine and, therefore, desirable. However, by observing the actions of the men in this book, one can see that what is considered masculine also includes more unsavory behavior. Drinking, for example, is a behavior that is associated with manliness in *Saints of Big Harbour*. The activity of drinking is such a deeply engrained norm that a man who does not drink is seen as abnormal. This feeling is evident when Isadore experiences annoyance at Guy's refusal to drink a beer and ends up mocking Guy's sobriety. Isadore feels no respect for Guy's decision to remain alcohol free because it is an unmanly behavior in society. Drinking, though seen as masculine, can be extremely harmful. It is mentioned that several of the men, Isadore and Alison being prime examples, are alcoholics. This unhealthy relationship with alcohol leads many of the men to act in destructive ways. Alison loses his job due to arriving to work drunk, and Isadore is constantly creating a state of drunken

havoc wherever he goes, especially where his own family is involved. Isadore's drunken escapades create tense and extremely difficult situations for his sister, niece, and nephew. This example proves that drinking to fit in comes at a price which negatively affects the man himself and the people he interacts with. How the men view and express violence is nearly identical to their relationship with alcohol. Violence is seen as the manly way to deal with an issue, and the men easily default to this physical form of reaction. Though sometimes effective, the dependence on violence as an acceptable reaction leads to physical, emotional, and legal problems for the individual or community. These consequences show that in order to maintain a masculine reputation, men face undesirable outcomes.

Even though following the behavior associated with masculinity can be damaging, it is necessary for the men to practice this behavior in order to receive respect. The men consider only very specific traits and behaviors as acceptable. To deviate from that norm would be to condemn oneself to social disapproval. As mentioned previously, Isadore is seen as the ultimate man, which allows him great respect from his fellow men in the community, and this level of respect allows Isadore to be pardoned for many actions that would be otherwise considered inappropriate. For example, when Isadore makes a crude remark concerning monks, his peers join him in laughter. Alison mentions that if he, Alison, had made the same rude remark, "he would have found himself tossed from the window by dessert" (59). The men would not have reacted as well had Alison made the remark because, in the eyes of his peers, Alison lacks what it means to be a man; he is more of a bookish academic than a strong and confident man and is therefore less accepted. When it comes to violence, the need to adhere to the norm is especially true. It seems nearly impossible for a man to receive respect unless he is willing to resort to violence if need be. It isn't until Guy gets into a physical altercation during a hockey game that his uncle starts to respect him. The same is true for Howard, as "[people] liked him better now that he had attacked a total stranger, drawn blood unprovoked, in the name of defending his sister" (287). After getting into a fight, Howard is seen as a force to be reckoned with. He proves himself to be exactly what a man should be: willing to resort to violence for honour. It is ironic that a man would receive more respect for being violent since violence is one of the traits of masculinity that has negative personal consequences. Since acting violent does have negative personal consequences, it can be deduced that what is considered masculine is not something of nature but rather fabricated by man.

The men reveal their true nature to be contrary to the traditional ideal of masculinity, proving the inaccuracy of that ideal. The men in this novel think that to be a man means to be strong in every sense; however, by developing the male characters Coady proves that they do not truly fit the masculine stereotype. Rather than being the ultimate, strong, unfeeling ideal, many of the men turn out to be vulnerable; Marianne goes so far as to refer to Isadore as “delicate” (195). In every case, the men try to hide their more vulnerable selves behind behavior that acts as a mask. For example, Kenzie’s mask consists of acting “sullen [and] often self-righteous” (278) in order to hide the nearly unbearable fear and tragedy he feels inside. Isadore hides his delicateness behind a mask of boisterous and rude confidence, and Guy tries to hide his emotional nature for a time by taking up hockey and fighting to appear manlier. Every man mentioned does the same thing, even if they go about it differently; they try to conceal the aspects of themselves that are deemed undesirable in their society by acting in ways that are more socially acceptable and masculine. The fact that all of these men are very different in nature from the ideal of masculinity proves that this ideal is fabricated. If actual men are not truly these unshakably strong men, then the idea of an ultimate man is unnatural and therefore made-up. The men in this novel continue to hold each other to this unrealistic standard and, in doing so, are creating an unfair and inaccurate standard for male behavior which the men have no choice but to follow, as to deviate would be seen as unmanly.

Saints of Big Harbour reveals a standard for masculinity that is inaccurate and damaging to many people in the community. Even though this standard is flawed, the men adhere to it without question because appearing as masculine provides one with respect from others within the community. The men continue to impress upon others and themselves the importance of practicing this false masculinity, even when failing to do so results in alienation. The men subject themselves to an obligation to act in a certain way, despite the fact that practicing the behavior may be unnatural and uncomfortable for them.

Works Cited

Coady, Lynn. *Saints of Big Harbour*. New York: Mariner, 2002. Print.